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## Exploring the dimensions of place branding: an application of the ICON model to the branding of Toronto

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# Exploring the dimensions of place branding: An application of the ICON model to the branding of Toronto

## Purpose

This paper explores the place branding dimensions of a city undergoing a concerted effort to build a distinctive brand for itself.

## Design/methodology/approach

A qualitative, exploratory approach is adopted, applying the ICON model of place branding to the multi-stakeholder city branding strategy of Toronto. A combination of interviews, participant observation, content analysis and professional reflection inform the study.

## Findings

Toronto's emergence as a creative city with global standing has been achieved, in part, through a holistic and collaborative approach that is integrated, contextualized, organic, and new.

## Practical implications

Place and destination promoters are offered a practical application of the ICON model of place branding, informing future initiatives and offering insight into good practice.

## Originality/value

Viewed through the lens of the ICON model, the paper provides insights into the collaborative and innovate practices that characterize effective city branding.

**Key Words:** Place branding, city branding, ICON model, Toronto, creative city

## Introduction

Competition among cities to attract inward investment, multinational corporate presence, tourists and the 'creative class' (Florida 2002) has increased exponentially in the last two decades, and cities, both large and small, are beginning to understand that they might need to pay more attention to building and promoting their brand if they are to thrive in the rapidly changing global environment. This promotional imperative has required that cities begin to move away from a two-dimensional destination tourism model to one of 'city branding' – a strategy of identifying valuable assets that a city has to offer, developing these assets and delivering their value to attract investors, visitors and new residents (Dinnie 2011). This is a more holistic approach that moves beyond the use of logos and taglines to leverage urban planning, economic development, resident engagement strategies, stakeholder management and long-term strategic vision alongside promotional campaigns to position a city in the minds of residents, visitors and potential

investors both at home and abroad.

While it has been argued that applying brand logic to places is problematic in that it oversimplifies the complex and multidimensional nature of space (Ren and Blichfeldt, 2011) as well as potentially leading to the commodification of places as spaces of consumption (Medway and Warnaby, 2014; Urry, 1995), place branding has become firmly established in academic circles (Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013, Warnaby, 2009). Further, place promotion has attracted multidisciplinary perspectives, ranging from economic geography (Pike, 2013), cultural sociology (Cormack, 2008), tourism (Lorenzini, Calzati and Giudici, 2011) marketing (Kotler, 1993; Gilmore, 2002) and public relations (Gold and Ward, 1994; Szondi, 2010).

However, despite a recent academic fascination with place branding, there still appears a lack of rigor in how professionals might go about putting it into practice. Recognizing the need to provide planners and promotional personnel a model through which a place brand can be achieved, the ICON model (Dinnie, 2016) has been proposed as a framework for the development and implementation of a place brand strategy; one that can be applied to places at municipal, regional and national levels. This paper applies the ICON model to Toronto, a city that has undertaken a concerted effort to position itself competitively in the last fifteen years. Toronto was chosen as a suitable focus for the research because it is a city previously lacking a strong brand identity and where city managers and marketers, inspired by both the notions of ‘the creative city’ (Landry 2000) and ‘the creative class’ (Florida 2002) embarked on a dedicated branding strategy that has helped position Toronto to emerge as one of the next great ‘world cities’ (Sassen 2001).

This paper will first explore some of the research that describes why cities must go beyond tourism promotion and move towards city branding — identifying why a new model for place branding is needed for both scholars and practitioners. It will then put Toronto’s branding efforts over the past fifteen years into context. Finally, it will utilize the ICON model as a structure to describe how a city like Toronto has both been successful, and challenged, in its branding efforts.

## Literature Review

This section reviews some of the key literature specific to the relatively recent phenomenon of place branding adopted by cities and nations in the last two decades. It focuses on the post-industrial cultural shift that has occurred in cities specifically, and the effort to utilize private sector promotional discipline to create differentiation in what is increasingly seen as an environment rife with competition for investment, tourism, and the inward migration of students, knowledge workers and engaged citizens.

Tourism, destination marketing and the use of promotional tools like advertising and public relations to attract visitors to a city for leisure and entertainment is hardly a recent phenomenon, of course. However the ushering in of the knowledge economy in the latter years of the 20th century made it clear that the old models of place promotion would have

to be drastically altered to adapt to the vast changes taking place in the global environment. The challenge has been felt most acutely in post-industrial cities that faced dramatic decline in the 1970s and 1980s as manufacturing plants closed, jobs were moved offshore, tax revenues dropped and their sense of identity was lost (Ward, 1998). No longer a hub of manufacturing, cities needed to find ways to differentiate themselves and create new mechanisms for economic growth. Many cities throughout the US and UK were fairly successful in re-imagining and regenerating themselves as post-industrial service centers; investing in both their hard infrastructure as well as shifting their policies toward softer intangibles like cultural development and the creative industries in order to create jobs as well as position their city as an attractive place to live, work and play.

A ‘promotional policy repertoire’ (Ward, 1998) has thus emerged, as city managers have begun to rethink their role and positioning — regionally, nationally, globally – and make attempts to develop a ‘competitive identity’ that resonates in the minds of target audiences (Anholt, 2003; 2007). Successful cities recognize that creating favorable images in the minds of their target publics is not achieved by the mere creation of logos, tag lines and promotional imagery (Kavaratzis, 2004); that function has long existed under the purview of destination marketers whose jurisdiction lies mostly in tourism. Scholars and progressive urban thinkers mostly agree that much more is required; a shared vision that engages the community to harness both the hard and soft assets into a ground-level experience that could continually generate downstream economic and social impacts, as well as create a strong identity in the minds of both residents and visitors (Hankinson, 2007; Landry, 2008). This has led to heightened interest globally in the concept of place branding.

Dinnie (2016) defines a nation brand as the ‘unique, multidimensional blend of elements that provide the nation with culturally grounded differentiation and relevance for all of its target audiences’ (5). This concept applied at the city level means that place branding is a multi-layered and complex endeavor that relies on many more factors than the promotion of key messages and compelling imagery; the literature points to it requiring a holistic, community-driven and collaborative stakeholder approach that draws on elements of urban planning, cultural geography, business and economic development, and destination promotion (Kavaratzis, 2004; Landry, 2008; Hankinson, 2007). Scholars have taken a multi-disciplinary approach to talking about place branding — combining the traditions of tourism, marketing, urban planning, architecture, local development and sociology (Dinnie, 2011). What is clear from the literature on place branding is that it is a much more complex process that transcends attempts to ‘brand’ a place for tourist consumption. It extends broadly to urban policy and economic development, and encompasses an entrepreneurial and neoliberal ideology of competition, consumption and cooperation on behalf of every sector of the society.

Within the context of the experience economy, place branding can be understood as the ‘aesthetication of place’, or the development of an overall narrative about what it means to be there, to experience the place and what constitutes the staging of that experience (Pine and Gilmore, 2011; Lorentzen and Carsten, 2012: 4). Place branding views places as experiential, involving not only the maintenance of the built environment, but also the

development of the ‘feel’ of a place, or the perception of it in people’s minds. It is not about the construction of *tabula rasa* narratives; rather it is the culmination of a long process of exploration, identification and framing of a narrative that must have some basis in reality, but yet create ‘evocative narratives with a strong spatial referent’ (Vanolo, 2008: 371). The place itself becomes an experiential construct; place making begins to move beyond the physical planning of structures and spaces, and moves into the creation of attention, using communication to ‘produce the place in people’s minds’ (Lorentzen, 2012: 18-19). This promotional mindset involves city planners and policy-makers thinking ‘through’ the place, determining what it offers, how it feels, and how that can be improved in order to become more economically viable. It inherently puts communicative action at the heart of place making, and capturing the attention of target audiences a central pursuit (Lorentzen, 2012). This requires a deep commitment to stakeholder management, and puts relationships at the heart of any place brand endeavor (Hankinson, 2007). Thus beyond mere destination promotion a ‘destination culture’ repertoire has taken hold in places, as they undergo both social as well as physical transformations in order to seduce the combined powers of the state, the media, private investors, and ultimately residents-as-consumers (Zukin, 2011).

The starting point of any place branding endeavor is to try to understand the underlying ‘brand identity’, or DNA, of that place. Dinnie (2016) notes that brand identity in the context of nation branding features such broad concepts as historic territory; common myths or historic memories; a common public culture; common legal rights and duties; commonly recognized or celebrated symbols; and even the landscape. At city level, these identifiers could include the common leisure activities and lifestyle considerations of residents; architecture; common dialect; food, music or culture; and a common way of approaching the world. It can be characterized by a deeper, underlying sense of belonging in that city – both reflecting the norms of the city, as well as being reshaped in its image.

### The ICON Model

Reflecting these ideas, the ICON model (Figure 1) offers a means by which practitioners can think through their city branding activities and implement them over the long term. The model proposes that good practice in place branding is characterized by adopting an approach that is integrated, contextualized, organic, and new (Dinnie, 2016: 252-4).

Whilst the model has primarily been offered as a framework for nation branding, it can and should be adopted by cities looking for a robust way of thinking through their branding efforts. As a fairly new, complex, multidimensional 21<sup>st</sup> century global city, Toronto offers an illuminating example of a city whose branding efforts, through the lens of the ICON model, can encourage other cities to approach their branding efforts similarly.

An *integrated* approach to place branding involves high levels of inter-agency collaboration, as well as collaborative public-private sector programs. In the context of Toronto, relevant organizations include, for example, the Economic Development and

Culture Division, the Film and Music Offices at City Hall; Invest Toronto, a primary business, sales and marketing corporation responsible for attracting foreign direct investment to the city; Tourism Toronto, the regional Destination Marketing Organization (DMO); Waterfront Toronto, a tri-governmental waterfront development organization; and the Toronto International Film Festival, arguably Toronto’s most internationally known cultural product.

Place branding must be *contextualized* rather than imposing a fixed, pre-determined template; the city brand of Toronto has been developed according to the values of residents, businesses, and other local stakeholders. The *organic* dimension of place branding implies that policy makers should accept that a place brand evolves not only through deliberate manipulation by established authorities, but also in unexpected and unplanned ways that are beyond the control of official decision makers. The fourth and final dimension of the ICON model reflects the need for a place brand to encompass elements that are *new*, be it in the form of tangible evidence such as newness in the built environment, or intangible aspects such as the creation of new narratives about a place and its identity.



Figure 1 ICON Model (Dinnie, 2016)



### Toronto in Context

Toronto is the heart of Canada's commercial, financial, industrial, and cultural life. The city has a large and diverse economy with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of \$157.3 billion in 2013, representing over 10% of the nation's entire economy. Over 40% of Canada's head office locations are located in Toronto. Since the city's growth is largely determined by exports, its Economic Development Strategy has focused its attention on export industries as the drivers of local wealth creation and economic redistribution. Of these industries, tourism represents a key export industry and is touted by policy-makers as having an important role to play in the growth of the economy through employment generation, foreign exchange earnings, investment and regional development (PrTDF, 2007).

Toronto has been hailed as "the most civil and civilized city in the world" by *National Geographic* and ranked as the #1 'Best Place to Live' by the *Economist*, the world's 10th most influential city by *Forbes Magazine*, and the #1 ranked 'World's Most Livable City' by Metropolis. Rated as one of the top four global cities with economic clout, and topping the *North American Cities of the Future* behind only New York, Toronto also ranks in the top 10 most livable cities according to the Economist Intelligence Unit, and the Boston Consulting Group ranks Toronto as the 8th most popular destination for job-seekers out of 189 global cities profiled (City of Toronto website, 2014 and 2015 Toronto World Rankings portals). In 2015, *Vogue Magazine* voted West Queen West the "second coolest neighborhood in the world", and the *New York Times* rated Toronto as a top travel destination for 2016, describing it "remaking itself as Canada's premier city, quietly slipping out of the shadow of Montreal and Vancouver."

### The Need for a Brand Strategy: Turning Around a Crisis

Toronto did not always enjoy this level of international attention and praise. A little known fact about Toronto is that it is a relatively young city, especially by global standards. The City of Toronto as it exists today came into being in 1998, following the amalgamation of six surrounding municipalities, quadrupling its population and expanding its landmass nearly seven-fold. Following amalgamation, policy-makers in Toronto began to promote its inclusion into a new class of what was being touted as a group of select global cities (Sassen, 2001). *The City of Toronto Act* (1997) and the *New City of Toronto Act* (2006) strengthened Toronto's capacity to manage its resources and build itself as a global competitor, allowing it to exercise new governmental powers with regards to taxation, licensing, regulation and infrastructure development.

The formation of the amalgamated City of Toronto in 1998 offered new opportunities for brand development and promotion, but also led the city to experience an 'identity crisis' of sorts (Jenkins, 2005). During the consultation process that led to amalgamation, the regional arts and cultural communities made it known that they expected Toronto to be



able compete globally in the realms of the arts, heritage, culture and creativity, and that the City would need a long-term strategic plan to do so. In 2000, Toronto's City Council created the Culture Division, tasking them with coordinating the City's arts, culture and heritage portfolio in a bid to develop a new world-class brand image for Toronto. City managers and cultural planners, inspired by the works of Landry (2000) and Florida (2002), set about developing cultural policies that would help develop Toronto into a global 'Creative City.'

Policy makers and planners began to ask questions and provide suggestions about how Toronto could better engage with its arts and culture communities to reinvent the old industrial model of Toronto into a global, cultural capital. The formal adoption in 2003 of *Culture Plan for the Creative City*, a ten-year plan to position Toronto as a world culture capital, developed in close consultation with city's cultural institutions and the public, cemented an economic development mandate for culture and creativity, and the city began looking for ways to promote its new identity.

The year 2003 was in many ways a turning point for the city, having had the misfortune of experiencing an outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Symptom (SARS) in March and April of that year. As the only city outside of Asia with an outbreak, Toronto received intense media coverage, with reporters converging on the city, broadcasting grave warnings about pandemics and widespread transmission. In total, 25,000 Toronto residents were placed in quarantine, with 400 becoming seriously ill and 44 deaths throughout Canada. The World Health Organization (WHO) issued a travel advisory, warning visitors not to travel to Toronto, despite the waning number of cases and the overblown severity of the outbreak. The travel advisory was controversial, and was lifted only a few days after it had been issued, when the last presumed SARS case was diagnosed (Paquin, 2007). However, the crisis had cost the city dearly in lost tourism revenue from bad publicity, a steep decline in reservations, cancellation of events and layoffs in the tourism and related sectors. It also exposed glaring deficiencies in Toronto's poorly funded and fragmented tourism promotion efforts, especially in contrast to better organized and funded competitors in the US (Mansfeld et al., 2004). The \$500 million hit and the loss of thousands of tourism-related jobs highlighted the need for a new promotional strategy to bring visitors back to Toronto.

Until then, Toronto's tourism industry had focused mostly on three main attractions: live theatre, distinct neighborhoods, and festivals — and none had really been given sufficient promotion. Further, Toronto really hadn't developed any sort of memorable identity or promotional strategy, instead focusing on its industrial economy and the small numbers of regional visitors from Ontario or Northern New York State who came to the city on day trips for shopping, taking advantage of the relatively low value of the Canadian dollar in the 1990s.

In the wake of the crisis, policy strategists began converging their ideas on culture and creativity as 'magic bullets' that would solve Toronto's promotional woes. The identity crisis the city had experienced gave way to reflexive optimism that Toronto could redirect its future through a subtle shift in policy priorities, moving culture from the margins to

the center of the city's policy portfolio (Patterson and Silver, 2015). The new vision resonated within Toronto's arts, academic and knowledge industries, and injected key players with a sense of civic pride and engagement in what has been called the city's collective 'Cultural Renaissance,' representing its entrance into 'the symbolic power pageant for international cultural prestige, thus conferring the mantle of genuine "global city"' (Jenkins, 2005: 170).

For the past decade, this mindset, accompanied by the dedicated promotional strategies described below, has allowed the city to come out of the shadows as a global cultural powerhouse. Policy documents such as *'The Culture Plan for a Creative City'* (2003) put in place a foundational commitment to cultural expansion and the promotional campaigns to support them. The city embarked on a dedicated effort to expand its cultural offerings, both officially and at a grassroots level. These activities were leveraged in extensive international promotional campaigns used by both the public and private sectors. Most importantly, the promotional mindset that emanated from City Hall permeated the rest of the city, encouraging citizens, organisations, the media and other stakeholders to move in a similar direction. Currently, the city's event and festival calendar is bursting with hundreds of diverse offerings throughout the year, arts cultural institutions both large and small are thriving, and other markers of success – construction, inward investment and migration, real estate prices, tourism and prominence in rankings and positive media coverage – are all up. As one participant noted, *"Toronto is really having its moment right now; it feels like we've finally come into our own as the city we've been telling everyone we want to be for the last decade."*

## Methodology

This research sought to develop a deeper understanding of the motivations and material promotional practice that occurred behind the scenes in Toronto's brand development since amalgamation in 1998. The goals of the research were to expose the integrated and interpersonal policy and promotional decisions that were made, along with the occupational resources that were utilized, in the development of Toronto's identity as a 'Creative City.' Multiple sources of evidence including a mix of interviews, participant observation, autobiographic reflection and document analysis were used (Table 1). Sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted between June 2014 and December 2015, with a variety of personnel acting in promotion, economic development, tourism, journalism, cultural policy and strategic communications positions within various internal and arms-length agencies that actively promote Toronto.

The interview questions explored Toronto's economic development, cultural and tourism policy developments over 15 years. Discussions also focused on the marketing, public relations and other promotional activities that were used to support this policy direction. The interviews typically lasted 60 to 90 minutes, and were transcribed and encoded in NVivo. Relevant information was coded relating to how Toronto's branding efforts might be considered in light of the ICON model's dimensions of *integrated*, *contextualized*, *organic* and *new*. The interview data was matched by data pulled from a mix of policy

documents, briefing notes, media coverage and reflection from the lead researcher's time working in a promotional capacity in Toronto's Economic Development and Culture Division over a six-year period.

**Results**

The study results will now be discussed through the lens of the ICON model dimensions of *integrated*, *contextualized*, *organic* and *new*.

**Integrated**

The *integrated* dimension of the ICON model reflects that place brand endeavors necessarily rely on a wide range of stakeholder groups. The literature on place branding is clear on this point — in an environment as diverse and ever-changing as a city, no singular agency, organization, institution or team of professionals can adequately undertake a brand exercise in a bubble (Dinnie, 2016). An integrated approach calls for both inter-agency collaboration across various industries and sectors, as well as the development of public-private sector programs that leverage resources and expertise for the greater good.

The development of a city brand is a complex undertaking that requires the collaboration and cooperation of a vast range of organizations and individuals, within both the public and private sectors, and acting within official channels as well as on an ad hoc, volunteer or entrepreneurial basis. To do this, city promoters must begin to think laterally — not just including those governed by a promotional or tourism remit, but straddling areas like biotech, science, academic, economic development, FDI, parks, and other regional arm's length and non-profit bodies. Cities offer a natural setting to capitalize on the influence and exposure of these partners, and city representatives would do well to initiate city branding activities by first bringing them all under the same tent.

As a senior tourism official at the City of Toronto put it, *"Most of the work is through the Municipality or the municipal equivalent. To do it best it needs to be very integrative. You've got economics, you've got to understand the market, you've got an understanding of the proximity to other amenities, you've got to understand all the organizations that are affected to drive it, to put the pieces together. It's a new type of urbanism."*

While it has been observed that Toronto has always lacked a cohesive structure in its brand development and promotional efforts (PrTDF, 2007), there do exist myriad institutions, department and individuals who are dedicated to ensuring both residents and visitors are aware of Toronto's broader value proposition. In its early stages of policy development, the approach taken by Toronto's Economic Development and Culture Division was to pursue transparency and public engagement, as one senior policy advisor noted, *"I don't think we can really think of government as the author of these things. In many different respects we don't have that kind of singular agency to do something on our own, so we're always collaborative, and always working with partners, and always*

working with opportunities. So I think it's sort of the same thing about creating a narrative around policy – to be as open and transparent as possible about it so that other people can interpret it to work for them.”

The city's initial development of the *Culture Plan* in 2002-3 and later iterations in 2010-11 were entirely consultative endeavors, with policy makers and promoters working across a broad variety of sectors, seeking out community and corporate representatives with diverse opinions and perspectives. The use of an independent facilitator in project consultations lent legitimacy to the undertaking, removing the government as the central decision-maker in the process and instilled a sense of trust and transparency in the process, preventing the outcomes from being perceived as entirely government-led.

This collaborative approach was introduced primarily in response to the SARS outbreak in 2003. In an effort to ramp up Toronto's promotional efforts post-SARS, a loose affiliation of tourism partners formed the Toronto Tourism Recovery Coalition, with the main purpose to organize a major event, dubbed 'SARS-stock', featuring the Rolling Stones and other major rock bands, with nearly 500,000 people in attendance. Investment was made by all levels of government and a major promotional campaign included hotel and restaurant offers throughout the city, anchoring another initiative put forth by the 'Toronto03 Alliance', a non-profit corporation that leveraged \$1 million donated by the Canada's five largest banks to promote cultural and sporting events in and around in the city in a program they called 'Summer in the City' (Mansfeld et al., 2004). The City of Toronto Special Events Office also launched a popular restaurant promotion, Summerlicious, offering fixed price menus at the city's high-end restaurants in an effort animate the city's culinary scene and instill a sense of pride about the city's food culture among residents. These activities soon gave way to the 'Live With Culture' campaign in 2006, which combined events, funding programs, promotional campaigns and cultural policy under a common banner celebrating the city's cultural diversity.

Those who were involved in the above initiatives, especially those whose occupation involves marketing and communications, understand that going forward, the success of these and similar programs involves the direct collaboration and integration with other partners and stakeholders. The most difficult aspect of achieving this is in clear and consistent sharing of information; the development of a broad narrative that resonates across sectors and is consumable by the masses. As a director within the Economic Development and Culture Division stated, “*So the key players - the universities are out there selling Toronto to students. [Toronto International Film Festival] selling Toronto to the film industry. Tourism Toronto is selling the city to tourists. Invest Toronto is selling it to potential foreign-directed investors. And industries throughout the city – places like MARS, or the province – there's so many people who have a stake in making Toronto work. And they should all be telling the same story, isn't that sort of what it is... they should all have the same thread of the same narrative? Not the total story, but understand how their narrative fits into the broader one.*”

This highlights the need for a broader narrative that aligns closely with what the city is, and what it might offer to different audiences. To do this, city managers and promoters

need to have their finger on the pulse of their city; paying close attention to the movements, trends and grassroots happenings that animate the city on a daily basis. By consuming a great deal of media, and leveraging market research and consumer insight to better understand and communicate with audiences both locally and globally (the remit of promotional occupations such as public relations and marketing) cities are better poised to ensure that narrative is accessible and effective.

**Contextualized**

The second dimension of the ICON model, *contextualized*, draws attention to the need to ensure relevance to stakeholder needs and capabilities, along with the importance of matching the values of target audiences. This requires that city officials grant a reasonable degree of empowerment to professionals on the ground, such as such as marketing, communications and PR staff in DMOs, so that the city brand is customized appropriately to the values of the populations they are trying to reach.

Because the identity of Toronto has been so diverse, nebulous and ever-changing, its brand development relied on understanding the lived reality of those who represent the city at street level. The *Culture Plan* (2003), the *Live With Culture Campaign* (2005-6), *Agenda for Prosperity* (2008) and the *Creative City Policy Framework* (2011) worked well because they reflected the existing assets on the ground; officials were careful to work closely with culture workers, artists, business owners, non-profits, activists, and finally, promotional personnel, to get out on the front lines and tell the story of the city's 'Cultural Renaissance'. One of the lead policymakers of the above programs was quick to point out that their success in reaching a broad spectrum of the arts, culture, entertainment, heritage and even corporate sectors was in the commitment to engage them early in the process, administering surveys, town hall meetings, call outs for participation, active media relations and facilitated workshops and focus groups. This allowed stakeholders to feel a sense of ownership over the policy direction, and offered space for a diversity of voices that might have felt otherwise left out of official processes. As a senior policy analyst noted, *"I can't say that one stakeholder is bigger than the other. It's really the larger cultural sector. And then the city as a whole. So people who live and work here. They have to feel that this connects with how they want to live and how they choose to live in Toronto. If it doesn't reach out and connect with the bigger broader sense of itself, then it's not going to work."*

The informant went on to describe in deeper detail the consultation process and the importance of maintaining transparency among stakeholder groups. *"The stuff we did involved a lot of community consultation. Culture planning was meant to be a really authentic, unique process to that community. So even though demands have been extreme, and the timing was crazy, Toronto has always maintained that important process of community consultation in terms of policy development. So it's not just our plan, it's Toronto's community plan."*

When it comes to promoting its emerging brand identity, Toronto has not employed a top-down, umbrella approach. As one senior official stated, *"There's not one core brand*



identity we promote for Toronto – it all depends on who we're talking to, what story we're trying to get out of it, and who we're pitching.”

Further, promotional personnel are given a lot of freedom in determining how to shape the messages for particular audiences. *“It all depends on what we think will make a compelling story depending on who we're talking to. If we're talking to an urban affluent customer, then some things will be more interesting than others. If we're talking to a family audience, or a student or youth market, or a tourism/travel publication, we'll focus on what's going to be compelling and relevant to that market — we'll focus on family attractions, events, things they'll specifically be interested in. If we're talking to a high-end tour operator who focuses on luxury travel, that will be an entirely different story — high-end hotels, restaurants, or exclusive experiences they can have around the city, like Fashion Week or a music festival. So, there's no master in or out list, it's all about what's going to be meaningful to that audience.”*

Thus it is clear that Toronto's cultural identity emerged not from a top-down, government-mandated brand strategy; it evolved through stakeholder collaboration and the empowerment of key promotional personnel with enough social and cultural capital to implement it via key media channels. It was also done in deep consultation with stakeholder groups, ensuring their voice, and needs, were considered at every stage. This is an important point – a city brand strategy cannot be imposed; it must develop over the long term in the hearts and minds of those who both live the reality of the place, originating, perhaps, from those who are hired to promote it.

### Organic

The *organic* dimension of the ICON model advocates that a blend of planned and unplanned activities must take place in a branding endeavor, but that ultimately policy should be rooted in the place's identity and culture, or its 'DNA'. This refers to both the hard and soft assets that make up the prevailing perception of a place – it is inherent in the broad personality of its people, the mindset of its political class, the over-arching values and ways of doing things that differentiate it from other places. There is an organic dimension to place branding that should be welcomed by policy makers rather than resented. A place brand evolves not according to a tightly controlled master plan, but is subject to a plethora of activities and incidents that may be planned or unplanned.

Amalgamation, rapid growth and the desire to define itself as 'world-class' meant that Toronto had a unique opportunity to brand itself. There was no template; Toronto was unique in its multiculturalism, its newness, and its proximity to other much more well-known global centers like New York City and Chicago. In the early days, economic development, culture and tourism personnel were tasked with figuring out what, exactly, this new emerging city might look like. As one informant stated, *“Toronto prior to 1998 was six different municipalities, each with their own programs and own identity. All came together because the province made us come together. So we had to figure that out. Part of the branding exercise and the desire to have a plan and develop the cultural model, was thinking through what is this new Toronto? A lot of it had its foundation in accident*



of history where we were struggling to figure out what the new place was.”

The lack of a centrally driven and cohesive brand strategy has over time, allowed Toronto’s ‘true’ identity to emerge. Policy makers and promoters relied on the activities and events that emerged from the *Culture Plan* and the *Live With Culture* programming to animate the city, and then stepped back to allow the various stakeholder communities within the city to manifest the ‘Creative City’ identity in their own unique ways. If anything, the job of promotional personnel was to merely curate and amplify the diverse array of happenings in the city, thinking strategically about how seemingly disparate communities could be linked in a common narrative. For example, a senior policy advisor in Economic Development noted that their role was to “*over time we reflect or identify emerging issues or see best practices from elsewhere and reflect what our community wants to do and try to implement it. So it’s a little bit a kind of thinking ahead and implementation and seeing where we are. It’s an ever-evolving thing...But most things start small and grow over time. So what we try to do is celebrate what’s unique about Toronto. We try to tell our own stories, we try to invest in our museums, our heritage. That’s why I think the nonprofit culture sector is extremely important in developing that community identity. That’s what’s different from other places.*”

Promotional practitioners also need to understand that many unplanned elements will emerge organically from the place’s identity and culture in the form of books, films, sporting performances, music and art that make an impact on perceptions of a place. Toronto has been enjoying a wave of popularity in recent years among urban multicultural youth, due in some part to the popularity and success of its basketball team, the Toronto Raptors, and the international stardom of one of its biggest boosters, hip hop artist Drake, as well as Justin Bieber (originally from Stratford, Ontario, approximately 150km from Toronto) and the rapid rise in popularity of RnB singer The Weeknd.

In 2014 Drake, who is very vocal in his support for his hometown, announced that his new album would be named ‘Views from the Six’. Mainstream media immediately seized on the new nomenclature, questioning whether or not this was Drake’s attempt at rebranding the city (Gee, 2015; McConnell, 2015; Chen and Zeichner, 2014). Drake confirmed in 2016 on the *Late Show with Jimmy Fallon* that the name reflected both Toronto’s area codes (416 and 647) as well as the six separate municipalities that were amalgamated in 1998 to form the mega-city of Toronto (Daniell, 2016).

The uptake of the name appears to have transcended hip hop and entertainment sensibilities, and crossed over into mainstream usage. In March of 2016, the local arm of the nation’s public broadcaster, CBC, ran a contest among local artists looking for a new anthem for Toronto, entitled ‘Song in the 6ix’ asking participants to pen an ‘anthem and love letter to Toronto’, with the rules stating that the lyrics must contain ‘The 6ix’ or ‘Song in the 6ix’ (CBC.ca).

City watchers and culture critics seem to accept that the nomenclature seems to encompass the ‘new’ Toronto - its diversity, its fusion of cultures, its relative youth and vitality. As a prominent culture reporter and music journalist observed, “*It really has*

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*amazed me how fast The Six has become the name for Toronto. You can maybe say it's similar to TDot. But even that doesn't seem to have taken off at the same level. That one felt more specifically linked to hip hop. Maybe that was just about the media environment and music environment at the time. But The Six really seems to have entered into the dialect, our consciousness, more deeply. Other people are using it, and we're all using it too. It really seems to have settled in."*

Recent coverage in mainstream media is doing its part to embed the nickname into the public's consciousness, with on-the-ground TV interviews asking citizens their opinions of it, and think pieces in the daily press that quote branding experts who note that the new brand has resonance, claiming that it might, in some ways, become the 'post-millennial TDot' with the value of Drake's economic influence on the brand of the city topping CDN \$3 billion. (Armstrong, 2014; Wong, 2016).

While none of this buzz originated at City Hall or from a prominent private sector advertising agency, city officials understand that Toronto's brand story is emerging and evolving as a result of many cultural factors outside of their direct control. This can happen in any branding endeavor, as those who are emotionally linked to the brand influence how it might end up being perceived by the larger market. Especially in an entity whose identity is as culturally contingent as a city, narratives can emerge from anywhere; however, only those with a deeper cultural resonance rooted in the political, economic and social DNA of a place tend to stand the test of time.

## New

The *new* dimension of the ICON model emphasizes that cities must not lose sight of the need for innovative products, services and experiences, which ultimately offer the potential for creating new place-related narratives. Crucially, if these new narratives come from unorthodox sources but nonetheless appear to resonate with domestic and international audiences, officials should embrace them and alter their strategic direction accordingly.

As one communications director stated,

*"Strategic plans and the way that Toronto ends up implementing a lot of its policy at the municipal level – our levers are through programs; activities (such as the PanAm Games, Nuit Blanche etc) and all the work that's involved in making that happen – so it's PR, marketing, planning. And as well, city planning – that kind of space and place aspect to city building is an important way of implementing our work."*

The biggest ways that city promoters can encourage newness is to embed the freedom for cultural development and a sense of movement and creativity into the DNA of the city, its institutions and its arms-length and non-profit agencies and sectors. As one culture planner noted, *"Cities obviously have to promote basic cultural assets – civic museums, civic theatres, public gardens, festivals. There's almost an obligation for us to promote*

*our core basic offerings that most cities have. But while we're doing that the bigger change – the Florida 'Creative Class' stuff – is to change the culture internally so that moving ahead as cities develop and grow, we're actually incorporating cultural impact as a decision-maker. It is a pillar that must be considered early in the game."*

Toronto's promoters have never been content to rest on the laurels of past successful endeavors; like most marketers in more traditional industries, they are constantly searching for opportunities to tell a new story, implement a new program, or convince planners and politicians to stay abreast of shifting consumer trends as a way of guiding policy development. Certainly it is not so simple to radically alter a city's hard assets – its infrastructure, transportation, or socio-economic structures – but the soft assets, the cultural offerings, events and festivals, and the distribution of public funds into new and exciting cultural offerings and on-the-ground animations and experiences for residents – lends a feeling of energy and excitement to being in the city that transcends locals and is felt by visitors and picked up on by media, further reinforcing that sense of newness and change. For example, the UK media outlet *The Guardian* recently ran a video series profiling Toronto's burgeoning music scene, referencing Drake and The Weeknd as a backdrop, but expanding the narrative to include up and coming artists, underground scenes, and the feeling of expansive artistic energy on the streets. No doubt prompted by the city's tourism promoters, the series was quick to proclaim that this was *'the new Toronto, the Six, made famous by Drake, but growing up on its own terms'* (Tait, 2016).

From a policy level, new initiatives are constantly underway, specifically related to aligning the city's economic development efforts with those linked to culture and creative planning. The Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport (MTCS) within the Ontario government has initiated its first ever cultural strategy for the province — a move that officials within Toronto are hopeful that will lead to 'trickle-down' policy effects for the municipality. This work builds on the last cultural planning framework, published in 2010, which identified Ontario's Entertainment and Creative Clusters as key areas targeted for economic growth. Promotional actors within Toronto City Hall are currently working closely with those in the province to help them guide their policy decisions going forward.

**Conclusion**

For cities about to embark on a branding endeavor, Toronto offers some key lessons. Despite some less than effective results in branding the city through logos and taglines early in the process, the competitive identity of Toronto as a creative city and an exciting, emerging global city has occurred not through a heavy-handed, top-down approach originating at City Hall. The city's brand has evolved more naturally, prompted by key policy decisions that included stakeholder groups and consumer insight, empowering citizens, community groups and promotional actors to allow it to unfold more organically.

Underpinning this identity formation has been the feeling that Toronto has always been on the cusp of something new; something untested, with no template to guide it. This has required promotional actors to constantly innovate, recommending the formation of key cultural festivals like the twelve-hour overnight contemporary art festival Nuit Blanche, or erect a giant, multi-coloured 3D Toronto sign at the base of City Hall, that has quickly become the focal meeting point and social media emblem for residents and visitors alike. City watchers agree that Toronto is on the verge of having its moment – a culmination of 15 years of laying the groundwork in cultural policy alongside promotion in tandem.

By reflecting on Toronto's brand emergence through the lens of the ICON model, this paper offers practitioners in other municipalities the opportunity to think through their city branding endeavors more holistically. Further, it opens the door to new ways of using the ICON model – both in looking back at how certain places have achieved success in their branding attempts in the past, as well as giving practitioners a framework for undertaking new initiatives that encourage a more nimble and collaborative approach in the future.

City managers and promotional personnel looking to pursue and develop their branding strategies are encouraged to follow Toronto's example, leveraging the ICON model as a starting point. The identification and integration of a broad and lateral set of stakeholder groups offers a solid foundation from which their voices and needs can be both included and met. Arming these stakeholders with a clear vision and the tools to implement it in their own unique ways allows the brand to evolve more organically. And constantly keeping their finger on the pulse of the latest and newest innovations, and integrating them consistently and holistically in their strategies, offers both policy and promotional city builders a platform from which to expand.

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